

Les Choristes



FILM SYNOPSIS

Les Choristes/ The Chorus

Director: Christophe Barratier

Genre: Drama/Music

Before Watching the Film

- How much do you know about the film?
- How does the title make you feel: intrigued, interested, bored? Discuss as a group.
- All the words below are related to the film in some way. Hold a group brainstorming session and discuss what your preconceived ideas are about these words.

Theme	French Cinema	1940s	Flashbacks	Chorus	Period Drama	Music	Discipline
Before viewing							
After viewing							

Refer to the list throughout the viewing.

FILM SYNOPSIS

Set in a correctional house for wayward boys, the film charts the progress of new music teacher Clement Mathieu (Gerard Jugnot), and his attempts to instill a little love and hope into his wayward students. The boys range from the socially awkward to outright bullies, and are always ready for a spot of stealing and fighting. Their teachers are largely apathetic and the school is ruled by the severe Rachin (Francois Berleand), a Head who fails to tolerate the most minor trouble.

Clement is a fish out of water in this world, a naïve man who initially fails to establish any rapport with the children, and soon finds himself in trouble with his boss for his soft ways. We learn that he is something of a failed composer, but someone whose love of music has never waned. His enthusiasm leads the children to begin to warm to him. He finds that one boy in particular, Pierre (Jean-Baptiste Maunier), has prodigious musical talents. Mathieu also forms a fatherly relationship with young student Pepinot (Maxence Perrin), a lonely orphan who is treated poorly by the other boys. His teacher makes him feel special by giving him the attention and affection he yearns for.

The success of the choir comes to the rescue of the school, and the pupils lose their tough exteriors and develop into respectable young men. www.tiscali.co.uk

Cinematic Inspiration

Although some critics slammed *The Chorus* for being yet another trite, feel good teacher drama, it received rapturous applause from France, where it was chosen to represent the country in the 2005 Academy Awards, as its nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. Actor/co-producer Gerard Jugnot had so much faith in the movie that he mortgaged his Paris apartment to finance the film. His investment paid off and he ended up making over €5 million for *The Chorus* as actor and co-producer, earning him the title of highest-paid French actor in 2004. The film also had the rest of the world sing its praises.

First time director Christophe Barratier tells a heartwarming tale about the healing power of music and the big difference that good teachers can make in the lives of their students. Barratier drew inspiration for the period-drama from Jean Dreville's *A Cage of Nightingales* (*La Cage aux Rossignols*) which was released in the USA back in 1947.

ACTIVITIES

■ Do you agree with the critics that this type of film is over-done and predictable? Discuss.

■ Research and watch Jean Dreville's *A Cage of Nightingales*.

The Chorus has been described as an '*inspirational teacher drama*' and compared to the likes of *Dead Poets Society*, *Mr Holland's Opus*, and *Goodbye, Mr Chips*.

■ Watch these three films. What are the similarities between them?

■ Write a genre description for 'inspirational teacher drama' films. What criteria do the films have to fulfil to be described as this?

■ Are there any other films that you have seen that fit your description?

Imagine you are an independent film director. You receive an email from a big Hollywood studio asking you to submit a film synopsis and ideas for a new 'inspirational teacher drama' movie. The brief stipulates that the film must be set in 2006, be based in a high school (not a boarding school like *The Chorus*) and the teacher/pupils relationship must use one of the following to help them forge a strong bond: Sport / IT / Art.

■ Working in small groups brainstorm story ideas, characters, plots and title. Now write a film synopsis for your new film, referring back to the genre description you wrote earlier.

Things to consider:

■ How might the film be different if it is set in a high school and not a boarding school?

■ How would the students' behaviour be different in a school in 2006 compared to a school in the 1940s?

- How will the teacher/pupils relationship develop using one of the three subjects outlined in the email brief from the Hollywood Studio?
- Now present your ideas back to the group. How are your ideas different? Which do you think is the strongest and why?

FLASHBACKS

Although *The Chorus* is predominantly set in 1949, the film begins in the present day when conductor Pierre visits his old schoolmate, Pepinot, and together they relive the arrival at their reform school of new teacher Clement Mathieu.

This central relationship becomes the film's focus, and through the use of a prologue and epilogue, we understand the lasting effect that Clement has had on his pupils.

- Why would Christophe Barratier have decided to use flashbacks?
- What is your understanding of the words prologue and epilogue?
- Split into two groups and discuss what you think might have happened to Pierre or Pepinot after they left the school. Each group should take a character and create a biography of significant events in their life up until the day they meet.

Things to think about:

What effect do you think Clement would have had on Pierre and Pepinot's lives?

Do they get married?

Do they have a family?

Do they live abroad or always remain in France?

What good/bad things happen to them?

Why does Pierre decide to become a conductor?

Why did Pepinot decide to go and find Pierre?

What happens after their meeting? Do they remain friends?

- Using the information from the biography imagine you are a journalist and write an article telling the story of Clement, Pierre and Pepinot's lives. Mention their life at boarding school, major events in their lives since school and what brought them back together.

QUESTIONS

- How easy do you find it to relate to the characters in The Chorus?
- Is the plot realistic?
- How do you feel towards the following characters: Clement Mathieu, Pierre, Pepinot and Rachin? Is their behaviour believable? Do you think the pupils would really have behaved that way towards their teachers? Would Rachin get away with all the punishments he gives out? Would Mathieu really put up with so much aggravation just to continue with the chorus?

In the table below, write a critique of each of the characters. We have started the analysis of Rachin character. Include your likes and dislikes of each character, and how you think they could be improved/made more realistic.

Character Name	Character Critique
Clement Mathieu	
Pierre	
Pepinot	
Rachin	The headmaster, is a frustrated man who takes out his disappointments by administering harsh punishments to the unruly students

FRENCH CINEMA

When deciding the setting for *The Chorus*, Christophe Barratier has chosen to stay with a traditional element of French cinema, and base the movie in a nostalgic backdrop. Many French global blockbusters are set in the 1950s or early 1960s, including *Amélie* and *Chocolat*.

- Why do you think so many French directors choose to set their films in a nostalgic setting?
- Research other French films. What other obvious characteristics does this type of cinema have?

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